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# Armitage: Hanoi trip best yet in MIA search

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A senior defense official yesterday said that meetings in Hanoi last week achieved the greatest progress so far in resolving the issue of 2,441 missing American military personnel in Indochina.

But Richard L. Armitage, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, left open the possibility that Vietnam may be conducting an orchestrated "misinformation program," specifically with regard to the identification "dog tags" of missing Americans.

At a Pentagon press conference held to report on his trip last week to Hanoi, Mr. Armitage said there were 95 reports of live missing Americans, dating from 1975 through 1983, "that we haven't been able to investigate fully and resolve."

His third trip to Hanoi last week on the missing Americans issue "was the most productive, the most businesslike and I'd have to say the most positive," Mr. Armitage said. He said the Vietnamese were very "conscientious in keeping to business."

The official, however, stopped short of saying that Hanoi had done everything asked of it. "Everything I ask for, and I think all of us in the administration ask for, is the fullest possible accounting — and that hasn't happened. But I think we got a pretty good bit on this trip."

Mr. Armitage noted that all the missing Americans would never be fully accounted for because some were on aircraft blown up in midair and others shot down over the sea. Vietnamese officials told him they hoped to resolve the issue in a year or two, he said.

The assistant secretary said Vietnam agreed to:

- Resolve the missing Americans issue as a humanitarian issue not related to possible U.S. resumption of diplomatic relations and other such issues.
- Cooperate with the United States in the excavation of about 200 aircraft crash sites, more than 60 of which Mr. Armitage called "high probability" sites for the remains of missing Americans.

• Promote "an awareness campaign" in the countryside to seek information about live Americans and crash sites. Technical discussions would be held in Hanoi at the end of February on such reports.

• Investigate the 95 "live-sighting" reports.

Mr. Armitage said Hanoi has consistently denied that there are any Americans alive under their authority and control. However, the Vietnamese last week said that if information is provided, "then we will investigate it and give you the results of these investigations."

After the February meeting — when Hanoi reports on its investigations and discusses the number of Americans that will be allowed to participate in the crash site excavations — "we'll see the proof of the pudding" on Vietnamese cooperation, Mr. Armitage said.

The United States has no proof that Americans are being held against their will in Indochina, he said.

"But the information that comes into our possession, and continues to come into our possession, makes it impossible to rule out that possibility. Therefore, we act under the assumption that at least some Americans are held against their will," the assistant secretary said.

He said the United States will use every intelligence tool possible to investigate reports of live Americans, including surveillance satellites.

The leader of a privately run POW support group based in Arizona indicated that the United States may

have to use satellites because it no longer has any intelligence on the ground.

"The United States does not have a human intelligence or covert capability in Vietnam and Laos," said Earl Hopper, leader of Task Force Omega. "Without that, they [U.S. officials] can't prove men are being held or where they're being held," he told The Washington Times.

He said the United States should insert U.S. agents on the ground to confirm the live American reports. "We must give the president the conclusive evidence he needs."

There has been a total of 806 reports of "first-hand" sighting of live Americans in what was North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, Mr. Armitage told the Pentagon press conference. Of these, 24 percent are known or suspected fabrications. Another 64 percent

matched with Americans who have since returned to the United States.

Of the remaining 95 reports [12 percent], 47 are of Americans sighted in an unshackled, "non-prisoner-of-war" status, he said.

Another leader of a private veterans organization specializing in the MIA issue accused Mr. Armitage of "softening" his stance on Americans alive in Indochina.

"He [Armitage] is definitely singing a different story," said Ted Sampley, deputy national coordinator for the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition. "This is a 180-degree turnaround from what he's been saying, from out-and-out attacks on people who say they've seen POWs, to an extreme softening."

Mr. Sampley speculated that the turnaround may have been sparked a Jan. 9 meeting between Ronald Reagan, Rep. Robert Smith, New Hampshire Republican, and Rep. Bill Hendon, North Carolina Republican.

An aide to Mr. Hendon confirmed that the meeting took place and that veterans and POW issues were discussed but said that he did not know anything beyond that.

[Mr. Armitage was reported to have said last July that it was possible there are missing Americans alive in Indochina, and as far back as 1982 that the United States had to assume such reports to be true and investigate.]

At the Pentagon press conference yesterday, Mr. Armitage said there was no discussion last week of "misinformation" regarding the alleged recovery of the remains of American military and their identification dog tags.

However, he released a "fact sheet" that stated "a misinformation program has been associated with recent reporting on missing Americans. These reports all pertain to the alleged recovery of remains and identifying data [i.e. dog tags]."

Mr. Armitage said "there are some people who believe that there is an orchestrated misinformation campaign. I personally think that it might be a little early to make that judgment."

He said there have been a total of 1,178 dog tag reports pertaining to 634 individuals. Of these, 78 percent have been returned alive, and the remains of another 15 percent have been accounted for. "Only 7 percent of those dog tag reports remain unaccounted for."

On the 95 "live-sighting" reports, Mr. Armitage said the oldest dated back to 1975, and the most recent to 1983. [He was quoted last year in a press account as saying there was one in 1985 and four in 1984.]

Mr. Sampley, the veteran's group leader, told The Washington Times this statement was "hogwash."

"They were sited as recently as October 1985 by a Thai citizen," Mr. Sampley said. "He filed an affidavit in U.S. District Court in Fayetteville [N.C.], saying he saw 39 POWs working as slaves in a gold mine."

The Thai merchant filed the affidavit under the fictitious name of John Obassy because he feared for his life, according to Mr. Sampley.

"The State Department has had

proof for the past five years that POWs are over there," said Scott Barnes of Kern County, Calif. "They're over there. I've seen them," said Mr. Barnes, who said in the same affidavit that the U.S. government had sent him to confirm or deny the reports.

Mr. Armitage said the U.S. government is "resolutely opposed to private forays" into Indochina in search of missing Americans. "We feel that they can only harm the issue. They do not have the technical means nor the expertise to deal with whatever they may find."

He also expressed reservations about setting up a special congressional commission under the direction of industrialist Ross Perot. Such a commission might send a mixed signal to Hanoi and prompt Vietnam to delay for a better deal, Mr. Armitage said.

However, a delegation of four members of Congress that left yesterday for Hanoi for their own investigation of the MIA issue "will piggyback in very good fashion on our own" effort, Mr. Armitage said.

The four are Sens. Frank Murkowski, Alaska Republican, and Dennis DeConcini, Arizona Democrat, and Reps. Michael Bilirakis, Florida Republican, and Bob McEwen, Ohio Republican.